



ASSESSING INTERNATIONAL DEMOCRACY ASSISTANCE AND LESSONS LEARNED: HOW CAN DONORS BETTER SUPPORT DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES?

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1. Introduction

This Background Note aims to provide a broad overview of international democracy assistance, understood as conscious, practical international efforts to encourage, support or influence democratic change and political reform in other countries (Bjørnlund 2004). Out of necessity, the treatment this note can give to such international efforts must be selective. It begins by analysing why the international community is interested in pursuing democratisation and how democracy assistance fits within the broader 'good governance' agenda. It then very briefly looks at a few key areas of donor support, including elections and electoral systems, political parties, parliaments, judicial reform, civil society, and the media¹ (a short overview of voice and accountability efforts is provided separately in Annex 1). The note concludes by highlighting some of the main lessons from almost three decades of support to democratic processes and making some recommendations.

2. Why is the international community interested in pursuing a democratisation agenda?

Following the democratic transitions of the late 1980s and early 1990s and the ebbing of the Cold War, democracy assistance emerged as a key area of support within the international community.² In addition to governments, multilateral organisations and a large number of national and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have become actively engaged in such efforts. Some donors have embraced the promotion of democracy more intensely than others. The US is by far the single largest provider of democracy assistance internationally,³ while other

* This background note is largely drawn from a report on 'Democratisation's Third Wave and the Challenges of Democratic Deepening: Assessing International Democracy Assistance and Lessons Learned' that the authors prepared for Irish Aid as well as other research. The full report is available on line at www.odi.org.uk/pppg/politics_and_governance/what_we_do/Governance/index.html.

¹ Other areas of donor involvement that are closely connected to the democracy-assistance agenda include corruption, decentralisation, and human rights.

² It is difficult to provide figures on the aggregate amount of democracy assistance due to definitional problems and weaknesses in recording the data. However, it has been estimated that by the turn of the millennium, approximately US\$2 billion per year – about half from private and public sources in the United States and half from largely public sources in Europe – were allocated to democracy-related projects (Carothers 2004; Youngs 2001). A more recent estimate, advanced in a European Council paper titled 'The EU approach to democracy promotion in external relations: food for thought' (undated) gives a total global figure of 9.9 billion dollars for 'government and civil society commitments' in 2004. On top of this, in 2007 the EU agreed a budget of 1.1 billion Euros for a new 'European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights', to be spent over the next seven years.

³ USAID funding for democracy promotion grew almost six-fold between 1990 and 2003. USAID is by far the largest single source of funding, spending \$830 m. in 2003 (Finkel et al. 2006). For European donors, no comprehensive data on democracy support are currently available; in various ways, such support is part of wider 'good governance' or 'public sector' support, and/or support to civil society. Likewise, no precise data are available for key multilateral development banks (MDBs). Overall, the \$2 bn figure cited above is likely to be a conservative estimate.

selected bilateral donors such as Germany and the UK have been major actors in democratisation (Carothers 2004).⁴ So has the UNDP, which has been involved in electoral assistance and institution-building projects (e.g. parliaments) for a long time, as well as the European Union. The World Bank, in contrast, has remained outside this issue, at least overtly. Due to its more restrictive mandate, it has preferred to focus on the 'good governance' agenda,⁵ although it has provided some support to parliamentary strengthening, and has engaged quite extensively in efforts to support civil society.

Democracy assistance responds to a variety of foreign government/donor motivations and interests, including foreign policy, security, geopolitical, humanitarian, diplomatic and developmental goals. Donors have supported democratisation efforts based on the belief that democracy as a system of governance provides considerable benefits over authoritarian ones both internally and at the international level. Domestically, many analysts and policymakers have argued that market-based, effective and capable democratic systems offer the best hope for improved policymaking processes and more inclusive development strategies (see, among others, Diamond 1995; Boutros-Ghali 1996; and DFID 2007). At the international level, the Liberal Peace argument that an international system based on democratic states is more conducive to peace and better equipped to address global problems like terrorism and environmental degradation has become widely accepted (Paris 2004).

On this basis, a consensus has developed within the international community that considerations of national sovereignty should not shelter a country's internal political arrangements from outside observation or criticism.⁶ Thus, not only has democracy come to be perceived as a universal aspiration, but norms have also emerged in the international community indicating that it is legitimate to have an interest in promoting and supporting democracy abroad (Bjørnlund, 2004; Burnell 2000).

The aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and growing concern with what the international community has come to define as 'fragile states' have given new resonance and urgency to the discourse on democracy assistance. In the current international political context, development objectives have become intricately fused with foreign policy objectives. Building on the Liberal Peace thesis, democratisation in poor countries has become a key component of the global security agenda, at least in principle. This is particularly evident in the US, where the Bush administration has come to define non-democratic, fragile and poorly governed states as the most significant threat to national security (Cammack et al. 2006). In the UK, Rt Hon David Miliband MP has also highlighted that building capable and effective states that are also emphatically democratic is an essential task in the fight against terrorism and other global security challenges.⁷ At least at the rhetorical level, then, the goals of security, state-building and the promotion of democracy have become closely linked – even if in practice pursuing all these objectives simultaneously has proven considerably more challenging.⁸

⁴ By the late 1980s, almost all European bilateral aid agencies had developed democracy-related aid strategies.

⁵ A discussion on good governance and how democracy assistance fits (or doesn't) within this agenda follows below.

⁶ On the other hand, it is worth highlighting that donors are not always consistent in the way in which they have pursued democratisation reforms in different countries. Thus, while external actors have sought democratisation in many cases, the same external actor(s) may support non-democratic regimes elsewhere (recent examples include Egypt and Pakistan) or may accept clearly circumscribed progress (e.g. Vietnam) when other interests are at stake.

⁷ Speech on 'New Diplomacy: Challenges for Foreign Policy', Chatham House, London, 19 July 2007. This was Miliband's first major foreign policy speech since joining the Brown Cabinet.

⁸ For an analysis of the tensions embedded in pursuing democratisation and state-building reforms simultaneously, see Paris (2004). Fritz and Rocha Menocal have also prepared a paper on state-building for DFID's Effective and Fragile States Teams on the subject.

In the most extreme cases, military force has been used to pursue (ostensibly democratic) ‘regime change’ alongside other foreign policy objectives. However, as shown by the cases of Afghanistan and Iraq in particular, such interventions have given democracy assistance a bad name in some circles. For example, the status of the US as a symbol of democracy and democracy promotion has been considerably undermined by widespread perceptions of incompetence and corruption, especially in Iraq, as well as scandals such as Guantánamo Bay and Abu Ghraib.⁹ Furthermore, some external actors who have acquired considerable international influence and power over the past few decades, most notably emerging/non-DAC donors such as China,¹⁰ Russia and Saudi Arabia, may not favour the emergence of democratic regimes.

3. Democracy assistance and the broader ‘good governance’ agenda

As outlined above, democracy promotion has constituted a significant part of development assistance during the past two decades. However, it is important to note that democracy assistance constitutes only one aspect of a much broader international agenda to support ‘good governance’. Donor programmes that sit under the heading of ‘good governance’ comprise a range of activities that go well beyond what would be narrowly construed as democratic assistance. While the concept of ‘good governance’ remains relatively vague and difficult to define, there lies at its core a concern about how states should govern – that is, about the rules and practices according to which governments are chosen and state power and authority are exercised (Kjaer 2004). Clearly, accountability and checks and balances are part and parcel of an effort to build stronger democratic institutions, but other aspects of the good governance agenda, such as state capacity and effective service delivery, require different types of intervention.

Current thinking and international discussions on democratisation in the developing world seem to be based on the assumption that today’s emerging democracies are being built on the foundations of coherent, functioning states. But in reality, many of the countries stuck in incomplete democratisation processes are not only trying to democratise but also more fundamentally to build capable states. As Carothers (2002) has argued, to the extent that international democracy assistance has considered the possibility of state-building as part of the democratisation process, it has too easily assumed that the fostering of democracy and state-building are one and the same thing. However, the conflation of these two processes is at best problematic.¹¹

The relationship between democratisation and improving other aspects of governance can sometimes be complex. While the good governance agenda tends to assume that ‘all good things go together’, to some degree, these two processes tend to pull in opposite directions. For instance, democratisation often entails establishing checks and balances mechanisms and diffusing power more evenly across a greater number of actors both within and outside government, while strengthening state capacity may call for greater autonomy and centralisation of power. One of the central challenges for donors therefore remains to become more fully aware of the fact that, when they make choices regarding which forms of democracy assistance to support, they also need to take into consideration other aspects of good governance which may or may not work with democratisation efforts in a mutually reinforcing manner.¹²

⁹ See Carothers (2006b).

¹⁰ China’s engagement with Africa over the past decade or so offers a particularly interesting illustration of this phenomenon.

¹¹ As noted above, Fritz and Rocha Menocal have prepared a paper on state-building for DFID that addresses this issue.

¹² We are grateful to Bill Morton from the North-South Institute for his comments on this issue. For a more in-depth discussion of the good governance agenda, see Fritz and Rocha Menocal (2006). A work package on governance indicators has also been commissioned by Irish Aid as part of the overall project on Good Governance and Aid Effectiveness.

4. Democracy promotion: For what?

With some variations, the main international actors involved in providing democracy assistance have concentrated their attention on the following principal areas:

- Elections and electoral systems
- Institution-building, including work on national constitutions, the promotion of the rule of law and judicial reform, support to the establishment of institutions intended to promote checks and balances and accountability, such as anti-corruption agencies and, more recently and modestly, parliaments. Support for political parties also falls in this category, but it remains considerably more limited.
- Civil society, where the principal focus has been on so-called issue-oriented NGOs and the media.

Over the past several years, donors have also increasingly gotten involved in efforts to promote ‘voice and accountability’ (V&A). Interestingly, thus far V&A has not been explicitly and/or formally considered as part of the democracy assistance agenda per se, even though many of the issues each of these different areas of support seeks to address are very similar, including, for example, work to strengthen civil society and government institutions to improve transparency and accountability. For the most part, V&A donor programme documents do not mention democracy explicitly as an overarching goal, unlike poverty reduction, good governance, or anti-corruption, which are consistently stated as the overall objectives of V&A interventions. This does not mean that democracy is not intrinsically or instrumentally desirable in donor V&A efforts, but the links between democracy and voice and accountability remain informal and indirect. For a short overview of the V&A work undertaken by several leading donors in this area, please see Annex 1.

Some of the key areas specifically related to international democracy assistance, including electoral processes, political parties, parliaments, judiciary reform, civil society and the media, are briefly analysed in the remainder of this section.

Box 1: Democracy assistance in sub-Saharan Africa

More than in any other region of the world, political transitions in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) have been influenced by pressure for change from the outside. By the early 1990s the international donor community had become an important advocate for pluralism in Africa, and nearly all bilateral donors insisted on the introduction of multi-party systems as a (political) condition for aid.

In the new millennium, a sense of donor fatigue has become evident with respect to conditionality instruments to support democratic development, as donors have increasingly been confronted with experiences of stalled democratisation processes. Above all, the experiences with democracy assistance in SSA have shown that local ownership of the democratic processes remains a key challenge. The donor community faces a real dilemma: while trying to promote ownership, they have at the same time been playing too proactive/assertive a role and, in so doing, have risked undermining local ownership.

Lack of attention to the social, economic, historical and local context in which democracy assistance is to take place has been particularly marked on the African continent. Excessively weak institutions and economies have meant that, in many instances, democracy assistance has created a ‘democracy industry’ focused on / experienced by capital-based civil society associations that have weak ties to any constituency groups, and have often been established by talented individuals who have left state institutions for better paid jobs in donor-funded NGOs. In addition, despite donor efforts to strengthen the institutions of accountability – the electoral channel, legislature, the judicial system, special institutions of constraint and local government – to date, executive dominance over political processes in SSA’s new democracies continues to persist. While donors are spending resources on creating political checks and balances, it appears that continued aid disbursements have enabled the same governments to maintain a strong degree of top-down control based on patronage politics (van de Walle 2001).

4.1 Electoral assistance

Electoral support is one of the oldest and most widely accepted forms of democracy assistance. In both political and financial terms, support to elections has probably been the most prominent sector of democracy assistance (Burnell 2000).¹³ Such support includes organisational capacity of institutions involved in the electoral process,¹⁴ international monitoring and the training of international and domestic electoral observers, and, in more difficult contexts, international supervision of electoral processes.

Due in part to the development of international norms and standards, electoral assistance is one of the areas of international support for democracy that has evolved and improved the most over time. In particular, electoral assistance has become an area where donor cooperation and coordination have been relatively well developed.¹⁵ It is also an area where donors have been able to make funds available in a timely fashion. Election observation has also become more sophisticated and focused on a longer-term horizon (with observers arriving two months before the elections rather than just a few weeks beforehand to be able to better assess the quality and fairness of the overall process), and observer missions are often based on universally-accepted standards. Democracy assistance to improve the administration of elections has developed into a sub-field of its own. Donor coordination, the development of basket funding mechanisms and learning from regionally- and internationally-acknowledged best practices has improved assistance to electoral processes.

On the other hand, election assistance programmes have suffered from several weaknesses. Though this has begun to change, for a long time donors seemed to focus their democracy assistance projects almost exclusively on elections and related electoral processes and to neglect other important areas of democratisation. Even today, it remains the case that the international community continues to expect too much from electoral processes, often looking to elections as the key mechanism to spur processes of nation-building after violent conflict (e.g. Iraq).

Moreover, while donors have tended to be considerably committed to ‘foundational’ elections, their interest and engagement in further electoral processes seems to wane over time. This has led to concern about the sustainability of electoral processes over the longer term, not only in terms of their considerably high costs and technical/administrative complexity, but also in terms of their capacity to adequately channel and respond to citizen demands (Ottaway and Chung 1999). Analyses of electoral administration, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, suggest that only limited institutional learning has taken place in many countries from one election to the next (Bratton and Posner 1999; Rakner and Svåsand 2004). This is partly related to the fact that key aspects of electoral management are ‘outsourced’ to international firms delivering election-based services, which has hindered institutional learning. Thus, donor emphasis should be much more focused on long-term observation and better, closer cooperation between international and local observer groups.¹⁶ Furthermore, external democracy supporters often only pay attention to national

¹³ Given the limitations with data, the relative weight of different aspects of democracy promotion in funding terms cannot be assessed with certainty.

¹⁴ Support to electoral administration embraces a range of activities including support to legislative reform, technical equipment, organisation and logistics, voter registration, and monitoring and observation. Large parts of overall support have been devoted to building the capacity of electoral commissions through funding, training, technical support and the provision of equipment.

¹⁵ The evolution of electoral assistance to Mozambique from 1994 to 2004 provides a good example of this. See Tollenaere (2006).

¹⁶ Again, the case of Mozambique is illustrative: while there were approximately 3,000 international observers in the 1994 elections and donors placed relatively little emphasis on Mozambican civil society associations interested in election monitoring and civic education, the 2004 elections were observed by 2000 national observers and 200 international observers. See Tollenaere (2006).

elections, and not to sub-national ones, thus missing important synergies with efforts at promoting better and more democratic governance through decentralisation (Ndegwa and Levy 2005).

4.2 Assistance to political parties

Considering their importance in democratic processes, it is interesting to note that donors involved in democracy assistance have only very recently started to engage with political parties.¹⁷ In the past, this type of assistance has been viewed as too political or sensitive (Hallhag 2006;¹⁸ Schoofs and de Zeeuw 2005). To date, the funds allocated to political party support have been limited,¹⁹ particularly in comparison to other areas within the democratic governance agenda.²⁰

Analysts have found that current donor approaches to political party support suffer from several shortcomings. Many observers argue that political party assistance is highly prescriptive, based on an idealised, Western conception of what political parties ought to look like. Beyond setting unrealistic expectations, this fixation on what a ‘good’ political party is does not allow enough room for adjustment to the local context within which particular parties operate. According to Carothers (2004), ‘[a] striking feature that emerges from a cross-regional look at political party aid is ... the fact that party aid programs look basically the same on the ground all over the world, no matter how different the political contexts and traditions of the places where the programs are carried out’.

This tendency among donors to be prescriptive has led many of the intended beneficiaries of political party assistance to feel very little ownership of the process (see Box 1). Perhaps not surprisingly, the impression among those meant to be ‘trained’ is often that experts coming from the outside do not know the local context and are eager to import lessons from elsewhere that may have little relevance/applicability to the national/local reality. Training sessions also lack follow-up, and are often supply- rather than demand-driven. Such approaches tend to focus on the short-term and are not conducive to the promotion of party capacity (Carothers 2004).

In addition, many donors (including both bilateral and multilateral agencies) are still reluctant to recognise that political party assistance (and democracy assistance more broadly) is inherently political. This is not a simple issue. Most donors work with a broad spectrum of political parties and claim to be non-partisan in their approach. But, in reality, much political party assistance is partisan. Donors often justify partisan aid aimed at benefiting one particular party over others by arguing that their assistance seeks to strengthen democratic political forces working against non-democratic rulers or parties. An example is the party aid efforts directed against Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia. On the other hand, donors sometimes oppose certain leaders or parties because they happen to dislike them or are suspicious of their values and platforms (Randall 2007). This is probably inevitable, but in that case donors need to be more open about such

¹⁷ International assistance is not an altogether new undertaking, however, as political party foundations, especially the German Stiftung, have provided assistance to party developments in new democracies for some time (Hallhag, interview with the authors, 21 June 2006).

¹⁸ Interview with the authors, 21 June 2006.

¹⁹ Quantifying this type of aid remains a difficult undertaking, however, because of the absence of comprehensive data that are comparative across regions and organisations (Schoofs and de Zeeuw, 2005).

²⁰ In addition to political party foundations like the German Stiftung and NDI and IRI in the US, the main bilateral donors openly involved in political party support are the US (USAID) and the UK (FCO and DFID), both of whom maintain the policy to support representative, multi-party systems through assistance to all parties in countries deemed appropriately democratic. Multilateral donors that provide assistance to political parties include the EU, the Organisation of American States and UNDP (which is working with political parties as part of its efforts to promote processes of national dialogue).

biases, otherwise political party assistance could be perceived as political manipulation (Krishna 2004).

Finally, very little work has been done in the area of evaluation and impact assessment of political party assistance. In particular, there is a dearth of systematic, cross-regional studies analysing the effectiveness of such aid. There are no clear standards or benchmarks against which to measure either party development or donors' performance in extending support to parties and aiding the party system (Burnell 2004). Bilateral and multilateral donors working in this area rarely coordinate their efforts (Hallhag 2006²¹), and as a result, there is little information-sharing among donors and little opportunity for learning.²²

4.3 Support to parliaments

Support to parliaments has recently become a more dynamic field. Such support can be approached as a rather 'technical' area of assistance, and one in which donor organisations, including officially 'non-political' ones such as the World Bank, feel able to engage, alongside more politically oriented external actors such as USAID.²³ Canada hosts the Parliamentary Centre (supported by CIDA), which has an extensive programme of workshops and seminars for parliamentarians and parliamentary support staff from all over the world.²⁴ DFID is one of the donors particularly active in Africa, and has recently begun to engage more strongly with parliaments across the continent (Hudson and Wren 2007). Work with parliaments includes the development of procedural rules, support to develop parliamentary committees, capacity building of support structures for parliamentary work (secretariats), training in how to organise hearings, funding for research capacity, field visits, consultations with civil society on various policy issues, etc. However, despite the expansion of activities, there are still relatively few parliaments in low income countries which have benefited from longer-term, intensive capacity building support (e.g. Ghana since 1994). In most cases support tends to consist of a few workshops or study visits that have little impact.

There are two main dilemmas with regard to parliamentary support. One is the fact that parliaments are supported with the expectation that they will exercise an oversight role over the executive (World Bank 2006). Thus, an area of parliamentary activity that has received particular attention is the scrutiny of the budget, including the interaction with external audit offices (discussion of audit reports, follow-up on audits) (Stapenhurst 2004).²⁵ However, many parliaments are either too weak, too close to the executive, or too narrowly focused on the personal interests of individual MPs to be able to fulfil this role – even if overall capacity could be enhanced.²⁶ Furthermore, development donors at large have contributed to disempowering parliaments (as well as other state institutions) through their predominant engagement with governments. To the degree that governments become accountable to external donors for large shares of their budget funds, donor behaviour in aid dependent countries weakens the role of parliamentary oversight (Hudson 2007; de Renzio 2006).

²¹ Interview with the authors, 21 June 2006.

²² Further discussion on donor support to political parties can be found in 'Globalising Democracy: Party Politics in Emerging Democracies', chapters 1-4 and 10, Burnell (ed.) (Routledge 2006)

²³ See http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTWBIGOVANTCOR/Resources/1740479-1149112210081/2604389-1149699443576/building_parliamentary_capacity_04_12_06.pdf.

²⁴ http://www.parlcent.ca/index_e.php. The Centre was founded in 1968, originally to develop the capacity of the Canadian parliament.

²⁵ This has happened in the context of increasing donor support for Public Financial Management reform in many aid recipient countries.

²⁶ DfID Drivers of Change studies are one of the most interesting existing sources on political processes, including the role of parliaments in low income countries. They primarily reflect the weak role of the legislature in most of the countries on which studies were undertaken. See <http://www.gsdrc.org/go/topic-guides/drivers-of-change#zam>.

A second dilemma is that a crucial need of many parliaments is greater *continuous* resources in order to fund analytical studies, legal advice, and the like (the prices for which incidentally donors are increasing due to their high demand for analytical capacity in developing countries). However, donors have been reluctant to provide such kinds of core funding for parliaments, fearing that doing so would draw them ‘into politics’, and also that normal budget funding would then be scaled back and that such support would be unsustainable in the longer run.

4.4 Justice sector assistance

Creating a viable judiciary, strengthening its democratic functions, and (re-)establishing the rule of law have constituted a major part of international democracy assistance for the past two decades.²⁷ Judicial, constitutional and legislative assistance became a rapidly growing area of development assistance in Eastern Europe and Latin America beginning in the 1980s, where they were closely linked to the process of economic liberalisation. In Sub-Saharan Africa, aid to the judicial sector emerged more fully in the mid-1990s as part of the wider good governance agenda.²⁸

The main multilateral donors have been the UNDP, the World Bank, regional development banks and the European Commission. In addition, a range of governmental organisations, including USAID, DFID and GTZ, has been involved, and a large number of NGOs has been present in this field as well. Overall, five main motivations explain donor assistance to the justice sector (Skaar et al. 2004): (i) to facilitate economic development; (ii) to establish a stable, predictable environment conforming to formal rules rather than patronage; (iii) to protect human rights and provide access to justice; (iv) to secure law and order; and (v) to secure democratic accountability, good governance and the integrity of the political process. Interventions have generally sought to improve the accessibility and legitimacy of the judicial system and address problems of responsiveness, capability and lack of independence.

In general, international assistance to the judicial sector displays some of the same weaknesses identified in other sectors, and many of the challenges are similar. There is, for instance, a need for donors to go beyond technical solutions and to better understand the context for the intended reforms (see Box 1). Justice sector reforms aimed at increasing judicial impartiality can pose a threat to powerful domestic actors, but donors don’t always take into account the political aspects of the reform process. Moreover, the assistance has been characterised by a tendency for bringing in Western blueprints of judicial reforms, which again has hindered the development of local ownership. Reform projects have often over-estimated the capacity of states to absorb new policies and institutions. Donors need to be more consciously aware of the fact that institutional reforms take time, and donor projects designed with a 2 to 3-year time-frame can be short-sighted.²⁹

²⁷ Justice sector reforms encompass judicial reform, i.e. reforms to improve the functioning of a country’s legal system, including law reforms, access to justice programmes, administrative reform, training, physical infrastructure, and legal education (Skaar et al. 2004). They also encompasses the police and penal institutions and, in many instances, security (military and intelligence institutions).

²⁸ The Danish evaluation found that 83% of grants to justice, constitution and legislation over the period 1990-8 were allocated after 1995 (DANIDA 1999).

²⁹ The problem is illustrated by European and British support for an initiative to address the backlog in homicide cases in Malawi. Court backlogs had increased considerably following the 1995 introduction of a jury trial system. In 1999, donors covered the costs of accommodation, allowances, and transport for all those involved in tackling the problem – judicial, police and prosecution personnel, legal representatives, jury members, witnesses and a doctor. This support was to be temporary, but by 2003 an independent evaluation identified an excessive reliance on external resources. Government funding for processing homicide cases had effectively ceased and the donor initiative had not, by then, led to the creation of an improved and sustainable mechanism for continuity after the project’s end (Piron 2005).

There is also a great need for improved donor coordination, which has not been easily achieved in an area where a multitude of domestic institutions from both state and civil society are keen to preserve their independence and benefit individually from resources that may become available. Finally, focusing on the formal aspects of judicial reform is not enough. National ownership of reform is often understood to refer to government ownership and the large amounts of funding required to make significant changes often lead to state-centric assistance. Donors should therefore engage with non-state actors and informal institutions more fully, especially in settings, like Sub-Saharan Africa, where formal state institutions are not always the most relevant institutions in terms of justice provision.³⁰

4.5 Assistance to civil society

From the early 1990s, programmes to support civil society³¹ mushroomed in all regions as donors (including bilateral and multilateral organisations, international foundations, and northern NGOs) began to actively support the idea that ‘social capital’ – or the dense networks of associational life that bound communities together and promote norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness – was the missing link in making democracy work.³²

This new emphasis on civil society derived from several factors. The first was disappointment with the failure of transitional democracies to become consolidated despite the introduction of multiparty elections. The second was a desire among donors to promote a model of development based on a considerable reduction in the size and reach of the state in poor countries – and civil society provided an alternative, ideologically appealing form of international assistance.³³ In addition, support to civil society was also thought to be a ‘more economical’ form of assistance and an area where results could be achieved with modest grants (Carothers and Ottaway, 2000). Democracy assistance to civil society has further remained attractive to donors on the basis that, in their view, it is non-partisan and does not entail any undue intervention in domestic political processes. This, however, is not always the case, as attested by civil society and media organisations involved in the promotion of human rights and monitoring elections, which are often viewed with suspicion by developing-country governments.

As civil society support³⁴ expanded throughout the 1990s, a number of evaluations and scholarly articles emerged debating the effects of democracy assistance on civil society (see Edwards and Hulme 1995 and Howell and Pearce 2001 among others). Many critics have argued that donors tend to reduce the concept of civil society to a depoliticised technical tool (Robinson and Friedman 2005). Donors have also tended to rely on a rather limited definition of civil society, equating it with Western-style advocacy groups or NGOs. This has led them to concentrate their assistance on a narrow set of organisations which mostly include urban-based advocacy and civic

³⁰ Reportedly, more than 80% of disputes in Africa are resolved through non-state systems, such as chiefs. Malawi, for example, has a predominantly rural population of 9 million, yet there are only about 300 lawyers, mostly in the urban centres, and only 9 of the country’s magistrates have had professional training. By contrast, there are at least 24,000 customary justice forums (Piron 2005).

³¹ The concept of civil society is contested but it is generally agreed that it constitutes the intermediary associational realm between state and family, populated by organisations that are separate from the state, enjoy autonomy in relation to the state and are formed on a voluntary basis by members of the society to protect their interests or values (White, 1994: 379). While there is a tendency among donors to equate civil society with NGOs, it is essential to remember that they are not one and the same, and that ‘civil society’ is broader.

³² One of the leading academic studies on the subject is Putnam’s *Making Democracy Work* (1993), in which the author seeks to explain why democracy works better in the north of Italy than it does in the south, and identifies different levels of social capital as the leading cause. While Putnam’s work gained a lot of currency in international assistance circles, it has also been criticised on numerous fronts. Among other things, Putnam never mentions, let alone explains, why fascism rose in Italy’s ‘civic’ and ‘more virtuous’ north.

³³ This was the basis of the free-market reforms embodied in the ‘Washington Consensus’ of the 1980s and 1990s.

³⁴ Such support includes capacity-building, grants, organisational development, training, workshops, research documentation, and advocacy work.

education groups and to marginalise more ‘rooted’ organisations, such as trade unions, church groups, etc. (Carothers and Ottaway, 2000).

This form of civil society support, and the types of NGOs it had created, has only had limited success in forging links between government and the grassroots level. In many instances, the perception has been that the NGOs that have emerged as a result of democracy assistance programmes lack domestic legitimacy and have relatively weak roots in their own societies (Robinson and Friedman, 2005). Many of these emerging domestic NGOs frequently have a narrow membership base mainly drawn from the urban middle class. They are also criticised on the basis that they reflect donor rather than indigenous views of democracy, both in their immediate goals and in the means they use to pursue them, and that they are depoliticised and too dependent on external funding (Howell and Pearce 2001).

Over the past decade, donors have also begun to question the wisdom of marginalising the state in favour of supporting civil society as a parallel structure (Fritz and Rocha Menocal 2006). The new emphasis among donors is to encourage state and civil society actors to work together in building a political system that is more responsive, accountable, and broadly representative, with the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) process as a leading example of such an approach. The question remains whether the role of civil society in PRSPs can be said to have contributed to strengthening accountability mechanisms at the national and local levels. The evidence thus far appears to be mixed (see Driscoll et al. 2004, Tembo 2005, and Rocha Menocal and Rogerson 2006 among others).

One development that is clear is that international NGOs (INGOs) have taken on the most prominent role in the new political realities formed by the PRSPs (Florini 2000), and those with local branches/partner institutions in the South have taken on something of a sub-contracting role. They have also taken on key roles themselves where national civil society has been weak or where an authoritarian government has allowed only limited independence to local NGOs. While it is undoubtedly true that INGOs have made important contributions to democratisation efforts in the developing world, it is also worth considering whether the presence of these (relatively) large international NGOs may have had an adverse affect on the capacity and sustainability of home-grown NGOs, which tend to be much smaller and lack the resources to compete with their international counterparts (for funding, skilled personnel, policy influence, etc.).³⁵ It is important for (official) donors to be aware of these potential tensions given their reliance on INGO financing as a means of supporting democratisation.³⁶

The emphasis that PRSPs place on civil society participation also highlights one of the problems raised in the previous section on assistance to political parties. Thus far, political parties have not been included in the preparation of PRSPs, and legislatures have, for the most part, been bypassed in the process of establishing national priorities. The choice should not be either civil society or political parties and/or the legislature, but rather how all of these institutions can be further strengthened so that government becomes more accountable and transparent in its actions.

4.6 Assistance to the media

Assistance to the media has become an integral part of democracy assistance programmes. In broad terms, the goal of this kind of assistance is to develop an indigenous media sector that is free, reliable,³⁷ editorially and financially independent, and professional so that it can act as a

³⁵ This is certainly a view that has been widely expressed by Southern-based NGOs in terms of their ability/desire to get involved in issues relating to how the international aid system should be reformed to make international assistance more effective (see Rocha and Rogerson, 2006).

³⁶ We thank Bill Morton of the North-South Institute for his comments on this issue.

³⁷ ‘Reliable’ meaning journalism that is accurate, impartial, and socially responsible.

‘watchdog’ and uphold democratic principles (Becker and Vlad 2005). Bilateral agencies constitute the major source of funding for media development, with USAID providing the most significant financial support (Kumar, 2006). Among multilateral agencies, the EC is the largest donor. In addition, a plethora of international foundations, NGOs, and training centres at universities, all mostly based in North America, Europe, and Japan, are involved in media assistance.

In general, donors feel comfortable and confident in providing media assistance, but it still poses certain challenges. External support for the media often does not (or cannot) address key bottlenecks. For instance, media ownership structures, or a lack of available advertising revenue, means that journalists become venal in order to make a living from their profession. In addition, while donors can advocate the privatisation of media outlets where these are still in state hands, they cannot usually influence the concentration of media ownership once these are in private hands – and often it is businessmen close to the government who will buy the most important media outlets (see also Espíndola 2005). Other challenges include how to respond to partisan media outlets committed to a particular agenda, and identifying the appropriate media outlets with which to partner in-country. Media assistance also needs to move beyond urban-based print media and provide support to media outlets, such as community radio, which have a wide reach, especially in rural areas. Public media should also be considered for democracy assistance (Howard 2003).

Perhaps the two most significant challenges are establishing a proper sequencing between liberalising the media and strengthening other essential institutions, and monitoring and evaluating media assistance efforts in a comprehensive and systematic manner. In terms of the former, the dangers of liberalising the media without professionalising it and holding it to certain standards became horrifically evident in Rwanda during the 1994 genocide, where political liberalisation produced a number of independent media that deepened the country’s social divisions (Paris 2004). In terms of the latter, the dearth of systematic (rather than programme-based) evaluations has meant that donors still have little guidance on what strategies may work best and how to design effective media assistance programmes.

In addition, donor coordination in the field of media assistance has been lacking. This has led to a duplication of efforts and even rivalry among donors, making assistance less effective than it could be. One model to emulate could be the International Media Fund, which constitutes a co-ordination of efforts by several major international media donors operating within selected countries (Howard 2003).

5. Key lessons and implications for democracy assistance

As set out above, many attempts at democratisation during the Third Wave have resulted in hybrid regimes and/or in uncertain democratic systems sitting at the heart of more or less weak states, rather than in consolidated democracies.³⁸ As a result, the central challenge for international democratisation assistance has become supporting the stabilisation and deepening of democratic regimes, preventing political meltdowns or authoritarian reversals, and promoting greater effectiveness of the state in ways that are compatible with a democratic regime.

Whether the international community is equipped to successfully embrace this new challenge remains an open question. Nevertheless, nearly three decades of experience with democracy assistance have yielded many important lessons, offering significant opportunities to improve current practice. Some of the key lessons and their implications are outlined below.

³⁸ For more information on hybrid regimes, see Background Note on ‘Hybrid Regimes and the Challenges of Deepening and Sustaining Democracy in Developing Countries’ prepared for this conference.

The impetus for democratisation needs to come from within, so donors need to be realistic about what can be achieved from the outside

To be successful, democratisation processes need to be driven from within and supported by (at least some) key domestic actors. As illustrated by the case of Iraq, efforts to impose democracy from the outside without the necessary domestic support are likely to be unsustainable, if not to backfire. This is particularly true of democratic consolidation and the creation of effective democratic accountability mechanisms, both of which require active and effective domestic constituents. External factors can play a significant role in democratisation processes, acting as triggers (the end of the Cold War, for example) and influencing the interests, positioning and preferences of strategic domestic actors who may be in favour of democratic reforms. But they cannot act as substitutes when domestic support is lacking, and they need to be both realistic and humble about what can be achieved from the outside (see Box 1).

Donor assistance also needs to avoid any (perceived) dominance over key stakeholders and their agendas, which could create problems of legitimacy, accountability, and sustainability. Donors and international organisations may push for democratic reforms and provide resources to strengthen domestic capacity and build a constituency favouring democratic change. But external involvement can also negatively affect the legitimacy of domestic actors if it is too overbearing and make them vulnerable to accusations of being ‘western’ or foreign. Heavy-handed donor involvement in and oversight of PRSPs, for example, has led many critics to question the ownership of such processes and to resent what they perceive as excessive donor influence in the domestic policy agenda (Rocha Menocal and Rogerson 2006).

It is important for donors to recognise more explicitly that democracy assistance is inherently political

Though this is slowly beginning to change, for a long time donors have been reluctant to acknowledge openly that development concerns cannot be divorced from politics, and instead they have preferred to view their interventions as mainly technocratic. However, the experiences of democracy promotion have made it evident that the field of democracy assistance is inherently political. Democratisation itself is a conflict-producing process that seeks to change the distribution of power between social groups. By empowering one set of institutions and actors over others, donors can help shape internal power dynamics, especially in poor, aid recipient societies.

Thus, donors need to recognise more fully the political nature of democracy promotion. This does not mean that such work should be partisan. Assistance to political parties can be a useful illustration. Political parties have remained one of the weakest links in democratic development in many of the incipient democracies emerging in the developing world, particularly in Africa and Latin America, and research suggests that their weak capacity and durability constitutes a major obstacle to the institutionalisation of democracy (Randall 2007). At the same time, political parties have for a long time been neglected by the international assistance community, especially as donors are reluctant to engage in work that is perceived as directly involved in domestic political processes. Donors and implementing agencies need to be balanced in their support, working with political parties across the political spectrum and focusing on the institutionalisation of parties (internal rules; funding; how to develop a programmatic base) in order to help reduce the strong personalisation of politics and clientelistic structures present in most developing countries.

Donors need to avoid relying on an idealised blueprint of democracy that is not sensitive to context

In general, a review of the literature suggests that democracy assistance is characterised by a lack of sensitivity to context (see Box 1). In areas such as support for political parties and the

judiciary, there is a widespread perception that much democracy assistance is based on an idealised and Western-based notion of democratic governance that not even the most advanced democracies in the North can live up to. Donors tend to promote the same reform templates in different countries rather than adjusting their programmes to the specific political, social and economic power relations in recipient countries (Carothers 2000). This has meant that, very often, donor activities lack flexibility and are not responsive to priorities defined in country. Available evaluations, for example, show that donor-assisted democratic reform projects have at times over-estimated the capacity of political systems to absorb democratic institutions and new policies transplanted from the outside. This inattention to context often results in an undue emphasis on formal, as opposed to substantial, change.

How to support hybrid regimes and tailor aid allocations and interventions has emerged as a key challenge in democracy assistance

Democracy promoters have come to realise that the task of ensuring continued progress after ‘founding’ elections is often much more challenging than the transition to democracy itself. Over time, international democracy assistance has therefore been geared towards strengthening the institutions of accountability – the electoral channel, legislature, the judicial system, special institutions of constraint and local government. However, one of the paradoxes of such assistance is that, despite these considerable efforts (by donors as well as by domestic constituencies), executive dominance has remained strong in many developing countries (see Box 1). ‘Strong man’ politics remain a marker of the political systems of many, if not most, developing countries undergoing democratisation. The general tendency of aid to support incumbent regimes and rely on agreements with the executive may itself contribute to this entrenchment of power within the executive and undermine other efforts at strengthening domestic accountability mechanisms (van de Walle, 2001; Fritz and Rocha Menocal, 2006). Thus, how to engage with hybrid regimes has emerged as one of the main challenges for donors providing democracy assistance.

Democracy assistance needs to emphasise in particular the strengthening and formalisation of rules governing executive powers and duties, as well as those of other branches of government, including the legislature, judiciary and civil service. The aim should be to develop the independence and capacity of other government branches and strengthen the horizontal accountability mechanisms among them. At both the national and local levels, democracy assistance should also seek to improve transparency by identifying innovative ways of building the autonomy and capacity of oversight institutions such as freedom of information agencies and ombudsmen. Over the past ten years, for instance, many countries in the developing world have passed transparency and access-to-information laws which can be effective in enabling citizens to hold government officials to account. Africa as a whole lags behind other regions in terms of passage of this kind of legislation. Only Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda, and Zimbabwe have FOI laws (with one pending in Mozambique). Donors should adopt a more concerted and united approach than has thus far existed towards encouraging the passage of FOI laws in Africa, and they should work closely with domestic supporters of such reforms to give them real teeth (Rocha Menocal 2007).

Donors need to engage with a variety of actors, particularly those outside the donors ‘zone of comfort’

One significant way to counter the tendency toward executive dominance noted above is for donors to cast their nets wide and engage with a wide variety of actors. The international community has already made considerable progress in this direction, as attested in its efforts to support civil society, strengthen the judiciary, and foster a free, independent, and responsible media, among other things. However, donors have tended to give primacy to some actors over others, and have not fully engaged with groups that may represent useful entry points for international democracy assistance. The need to work with civil society across all levels (central,

regional, local) is increasingly recognised, but donors are still struggling with how to translate this into practice. In general, the international community needs to do more to reach out to societal actors in the rural areas, as well as groups that they have consciously maintained at a distance because they may be considered too political or militant. Such organisations include traditional organisations like trade unions, farmers' unions, and faith-based groups, and, as noted above, political parties.

There is a need to build linkages between political parties and civil society organisations

Related to the issue above about engaging with a wider set of actors, the international community also needs to address the imbalance between assistance to political parties and assistance to civil society. So far, most of the funds have gone to the latter, with the effect of devaluing and marginalising institutions that are essential to representative democracy (Doherty, 2002). Donors should not think in terms of either/or, but rather develop strategies that work to strengthen both civil society organisations and political parties and help to build synergies between them.

It is essential to achieve a balance between different donor goals and to improve policy coherence

As was highlighted early on in this Background Note, democracy assistance is only one aspect of a much broader donor agenda to promote 'good governance' and development. Democratisation assistance is primarily focused on strengthening institutions deemed essential to ensure that the processes through which decisions are made and power is exercised are inclusive, broadly participatory, open, fair, transparent, and accountable. However, particularly in poor countries, weak state capacity as well as weak professional capacity of non-governmental actors are often a major problem. Freedom and other forms of political liberalisation need to increase alongside an expansion of state capacities and a framework of (formal) institutions that can adequately channel and contain those freedoms. The case of the media in Rwanda, which played a significant role in heightening ethnic tensions and disseminating hatred (Paris 2004), is a particularly harrowing example of what happens when the former develops without the latter.

Significantly, the relationship between democratisation and improving other aspects of the broader governance agenda can sometimes be complex and pull in different directions, and many of the ensuing tensions remain to be addressed. It is therefore essential for donors to prioritise their goals and think about how best to sequence them in order to avoid 'overloading' societies and governance systems with constant changes and demands, not only in their democracy assistance but also in their good governance programmes more generally.

This need to prioritise reforms and remain realistic about what can be achieved is captured in Merilee Grindle's concept of 'good-enough' governance (Grindle 2007). This approach understands governance as a multi-dimensional concept that can be disaggregated into discrete challenges that can potentially be tackled separately and at different times. However, while an instrumental approach to governance and development may be useful (because it avoids placing excessive or unrealistic demands on the state and recognises that there is no unique path to 'good governance'), it skirts around the issue of whether there should be a set of minimum standards against which states should be held up – a concern that is at the very core of democracy assistance.³⁹

It is also essential to acknowledge that democracy assistance takes place alongside the pursuit of other foreign policy objectives. There can be contradictions between security and other foreign policy interests on the one hand, and interests in promoting democratisation and broader good

³⁹ For a more detailed discussion of the 'good enough' governance approach and its implications for democracy, see Fritz and Rocha Menocal (2006).

governance on the other. This is why greater policy coherence is highly desirable in order to ensure that efforts on one front are not undermined by activities in other areas.

Moreover, some forms of external support to democratisation may evolve organically, without direct intervention from donors; that is, arising as a by-product of the general linkages between countries undergoing democratisation and developed democracies, rather than from donor assistance as such. It may therefore be that external assistance to democratisation is most effective when bringing different policy areas together, and policy-makers should subsequently seek to strengthen the links between democratisation assistance and other policy areas of the donor country (for example, foreign, immigration and development policy, and educational, research, and administrative exchanges, etc.). Opportunities should be explored for mainstreaming the principles embedded in democracy assistance, including participation, accountability and transparency. Examples may include inserting civic education into support for the education sector, or incorporating campaigns about opportunities for political participation within support for the transport sector, etc.

Donors need to come to terms with the contradictions between long-term processes of democracy and the need for results

Donors need to become more fully conscious of the fact that strengthening democratic governance requires a long-term commitment. Building democracy is necessarily a prolonged and non-linear process. This calls for patience and willingness to accept setbacks. However, because of the pressure to show ‘results’, donors continue to pursue forms of democracy promotion which are too short-term (focused on elections but less on the strengthening of other key institutions), and/or involve frequent changes in policy direction. Donors need to come to terms more seriously with the potential tensions that arise in the kinds of assistance that they provide due to these very different time horizons.

The sustainability of many donor interventions remains a problem that donors need to address

The sustainability of many donor interventions remains a concern. For example, while it is relatively easy – and cheap – to set up an NGO, establishing an association that speaks on behalf of a certain constituency and has an impact on policy formulation is far more time-consuming and takes long-term commitment. Donor assistance has succeeded in changing the organisational landscape of many countries, but it is less clear whether democracy assistance has succeeded in stimulating the emergence and/or further development of an active and vibrant home-grown civil society. Donors have much work to do in terms of strengthening domestic civil society organisations so that they can become sustainable and self-sufficient over time. They should also be more sensitive to the fact that extensive reliance on INGOs may itself undermine the capacity and sustainability of domestic NGOs. As demonstrated by the experience with PRSPs, INGOs are usually better placed than domestic ones in terms of acquiring a voice and influencing policy processes, which again may disadvantage home-grown civic organisations.

Greater harmonisation and alignment in democratisation assistance is desirable

There is a considerable need for donors to promote harmonisation and alignment if democracy assistance is to become more effective. This remains a challenge, both within donors’ individual programmes as well as collectively. Donor fragmentation and lack of alignment with country priorities tend to undermine already rather weak institutions, especially in hybrid regimes. This in turn has important implications for overall governance and state capacity, and ultimately for the effectiveness with which aid can be used in-country (Fritz and Rocha Menocal 2006).

In the area of judicial reform, for instance, it is clearly essential not to ‘import’ mutually contradictory institutions and legal rules from different sources. Similarly, in other areas (e.g. assistance to parliaments, political parties, media, etc.) it is important to provide assistance that is

well-adapted to country circumstances, and that enables country ownership of reforms. Furthermore, to date, various forms of democratisation support – in particular support to political parties and to elections – have often remained separate from general development assistance. While the involvement of specialised actors such as party foundations or election observation missions may be beneficial, these should be more strongly linked with wider efforts to support development (especially in a context where the latter is becoming more ‘politically aware’).

More meso- and macro-level evaluations of democratisation assistance are needed

Overall, international actors have invested substantially in promoting democratic developments around the world. However, knowledge about the long-term effects of democracy assistance remains limited.⁴⁰ One reason for the dearth of accessible knowledge are the numerous challenges involved in evaluating democracy promotion. In particular, it is difficult to attribute success or failure to a specific democracy promotion effort, given that (i) the general impact of these programmes depends on a host of other internal and external influences; (ii) the effects of democracy assistance programmes may not be fully apparent for years; (iii) democratic processes are interlinked with other social, economic, political and historical processes and conditions; and (iv) quantitative indicators can only capture this reality to a limited extent.

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that as the ‘menu’ of democracy assistance has evolved, efforts to share knowledge of best practices and lessons have remained few and partial. Donor agencies have begun to evaluate their democracy promotion projects, but substantive evaluations of donor programmes which cut across their multiple activities remain relatively scarce. For the most part, evaluations tend to focus on particular projects in particular countries; while more systematic evaluations that are either thematic (e.g. assistance to media) or that comprise a review of a range of interventions and their impact on a country’s democratisation dynamic are extremely rare. Furthermore, evaluations are usually not published, so that only rarely has the resulting knowledge been compiled into retrospective learning exercises that provide an opportunity for the sharing of experiences across agencies. With a few notable exceptions, the academic community has not stepped in to fill this gap and democracy assistance is poorly represented in scholarly titles.⁴¹ Developing evaluation methods to assess the deepening and consolidation of democratisation (which, compared with the initial triggering/installing of democracy is much less directly observable) seems particularly important.

Annex: Donor support towards Voice and Accountability (V&A)⁴²

1. How is V&A defined and why is it believed to be important?

Voice refers to the capacity to express views and interests and to the exercise of this capacity. The concept of voice is used in various theories of participation, citizenship and human rights; therefore there is no single definition. However, in relation to accountability, voice can include complaint, organised protest, lobbying and participation in decision making, service delivery or policy implementation (Goetz and Gaventa 2001). Thus, voice is about people expressing their views and interests in an effort to influence government priorities and decision-making processes.

⁴⁰ Some bilateral agencies have conducted evaluations of their overall governance aid, such as Danida (1999a; b; c). The human rights and governance arm of Irish Aid was evaluated in 2002 (CMI, 2002). By far the most ambitious effort to assess the impact of democracy assistance has been undertaken by USAID. See http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/democracy_and_governance/. However, this evaluation focuses on the overall impact of funding levels only, and does not explore the impact of the programme content.

⁴¹ Notable exceptions are Carothers (2000, 2004); Carothers and Ottaway (2003); Burnell (2000); Bjørnlund (2004).

⁴² This Annex was prepared by Bhavna Sharma, ODI, and it draws on an ODI project analysing the work of 7 donors in this area, including BMZ, DANIDA, DFID, DGCD, NORAD, SDC and SIDA. The project includes a review of current academic literature and donors’ policy documents, a review of 90 interventions in ten countries and two pilot case studies in Benin and Nicaragua. For more information please contact Marta Foresti at m.foresti@odi.org.uk.

Capacity for action is key – in other words, the focus is not the creation of voice for its own sake but rather the capacity to access information, ask questions and demand answers.

While definitions of accountability can also vary, the three core concepts at the heart of accountability are answerability, transparency and enforcement. Accountability exists when those who set and implement state rules – politicians and public officials – are answerable to the people who live under those rules. Therefore, transparency in decision-making processes is crucial, allowing for public scrutiny and questioning with some control over these processes exerted via enforcement of sanctions and penalties (Schedler et al.1999).

V&A are closely related but distinct concepts. They come together when those expressing their demands come into contact with those that have the authority, jurisdiction and ability to answer to those demands. However, V&A entails a dynamic and complex dynamic, not a static one. It is not simply a relationship between ruler and ruled but a series of relationships between multiple decision-makers and multiple groups of citizens at the local, national and international levels, particularly given the emergence of global arenas and the increasing importance of decentralisation. Actors are playing new roles in terms of accountability, sometimes blurring the distinction between vertical and horizontal forms of accountability. At the same time, those actors demanding accountability, particularly NGOs, are now also subject to scrutiny and are facing increasing demands to demonstrate their legitimacy and representativeness.

Given that V&A is about the relationship between the citizen and the state, many donors see it as a key dimension of governance. How the state functions effectively and how decisions are made and implemented is precisely the focus of V&A. Thus, V&A is not simply about how civil society can hold the state to account, but also about how the state builds capacity and political will to respond to increased public scrutiny and growing societal demands. The mechanisms by which these dialogues and relationships are developed (actors, spaces and channels) are key to the operationalisation of V&A.

While donors acknowledge the intrinsic value of V&A, it is also seen as being instrumental in reaching broader development goals, such as poverty reduction, via the strengthening of governance. By increasing the voice of citizens and making the government more responsive to their needs, V&A is intended to lead to a more effective and better functioning state that sets its priorities according to the needs and interests articulated by the population. Also, given that poverty is multi-dimensional and includes powerlessness, voicelessness and lack of accountability, increasing the voice(s) of the poor should address directly one aspect of poverty.

2. Main actors involved in V&A⁴³

There is a great deal of commonality in the way donors articulate their support for V&A, rooted as it is in a shared liberal democratic model. Variations in donor approaches to V&A are a result of certain values, such as democracy and human rights, being more central to the mandate of some donors than others. Thus, differences exist along a continuum with some donors favouring a more ‘bottom-up’ and citizen-centric approach and others relying on a more state-centric approach focused on institutional frameworks and policy processes.⁴⁴ However, the lines are beginning to blur between these categories. The more state-centred approaches increasingly recognise the need to engage with non-state actors such as the media and civil society, while

⁴³ Note that information regarding actors is primarily taken from the ODI project mentioned above.

⁴⁴ Some donors, such as SIDA, SDC and NORAD, favour a ‘bottom-up’ approach, while DFID, although committed to the participation of the poor in development, has tended to emphasise the role of the state. BMZ’s focus tends to be further along the state-end of the spectrum favouring institutional strengthening and building administrative capacity. The role of non-state watchdogs, such as ombudsman and media, is also recognised by DANIDA and SDC.

people-oriented approaches seek to engage with state institutions to guarantee the rights and voice of the groups they usually work with.

Whether donors work from a statist or civil society focused approach, there is a consensus regarding the state and non-state actors they engage with. Governments, national or local, are the key state actors favoured by donors. Although there are growing attempts to engage with other state institutions, such as the judiciary, parliaments, human rights ombudsmen and anti-corruption commissions, support for them remains marginal when compared with assistance received by government and ministries.

Donors are also consistent in their choice of non-state partners. Overwhelmingly, donors choose to engage with international and national NGOs above any other non-state actor or civil society group (this closely mirrors the approach to civil society support discussed in the main body of this Background Note). Groups such as faith-based organisations, trade unions, professional associations, community based organisations and minority groups are largely omitted from interventions. The only other non-state actor gaining prominence recently has been the media, with donors keen to build and strengthen free and independent press, radio and TV. While donors have made various attempts to engage with ‘non-traditional’ civil society groups, they have struggled to reach beyond the national level given their own capacity constraints as well as those of the local organisations (which can be considerable). International and national NGOs are favoured for their perceived legitimacy and accountability as well as for possessing the requisite minimum capacity to work with donors. However, this strategy is not without its own risks, with the representativeness and legitimacy of these larger NGOs being questioned by grassroots organisations and the population in general (this point also comes up in the section on civil society support in the main body of this Note).

3. What type of assistance has been provided in each of these areas?

V&A is not a discrete sector and therefore interventions cover a broad range of activities. Donors strengthen voice and accountability by attempting to create or strengthen the preconditions for their exercise. This means seeking to influence: (i) the enabling environment; (ii) the institutional framework required for voice and accountability; (iii) channels for citizens to express their voice or hold government to account; and (iv) individual state agencies required for voice and accountability.

The enabling environment refers to the personal and institutional capabilities required for meaningful accountability relationships and expression of voice, and the broader political and socio-cultural context in which these operate. Donors may therefore be engaged in activities to raise awareness, such as civic education campaigns, or in activities which build particular skills, such as organisational and leadership skills. However, tackling the underlying power relations and socio-cultural norms that shape how people interact with each other, such as working to alter gender relations, remains complex and problematic. Therefore, donor attention tends to focus on building the advocacy and technical skills of civil society to engage in dialogue and decision making processes. Informal systems and processes remain largely untouched by donor assistance.

A key entry point for donor assistance has been the formal institutional framework which establishes the ‘rules of the game’, providing the incentives and sanctions that govern individual and institutional behaviour. Donor assistance has included strengthening the legal and regulatory framework (that set out rights and responsibilities for both citizens and the state, including those that govern accountability relationships), improving institutional checks and balances and bureaucratic regulations, such as audits and human resource management, and supporting policy processes. A large proportion of donor assistance also focuses on building the technical and functional capacity of state institutions to become more open and responsive to citizens. While

trainings and capacity building programmes have some success in building the required skills sets for V&A, donors have been less successful in tackling the issues of political will and incentives structures upon which V&A sustainability depend.

On channels, donor assistance has focused primarily on supporting participatory decision-making processes such as budget monitoring and service delivery. In V&A, channels are identified according to the function they perform – as mechanisms through which citizens express their voice or demand accountability – and are therefore *not* restricted to a particular form. Channels can include organisations, modes of expression and public fora, both formal and informal. Donors thus have a range of options open to them, from supporting state mechanisms, such as elections, political parties and ombudsmen, to non-state mechanisms such as the media, public meetings and civil society networks. However, programming focused specifically on mechanisms is the weakest area of donor assistance, with donors more willing and able to support either state or non-state actors and their functioning than the dialogue and accountability relationship between the two.

4. Lessons learned from V&A assistance and remaining challenges

The principal lesson learned is that context matters and that a ‘one size fits all’ approach will not work for V&A (as discussed in the main body of this Note, this is also true of democracy assistance projects more broadly). Since V&A is about the relationship between state and society, all of the factors which can influence this relationship, from the formal political structure and economy to informal power relations and patronage, need to be analysed and the analysis introduced into the design of specific programming. The challenge for donors is how to achieve a detailed and nuanced understanding of every context they are operating in and use this knowledge in the application of assistance in specific cases. A contextual analysis should not simply be an overview of the political, social and economic setting but also of key relevant issues such as political economy structures and institutions, legal status of rights to information and aid architecture, among others, as well as of the opportunities, challenges and entry points that they provide.

In addition to this, there is the added complexity of merging country-specific contexts with overarching and worldwide goals of donors. Country offices are very often fully aware of the context, the potential entry points and the challenges that they need to consider when implementing a V&A programme, but they face growing pressure from their headquarters to implement programmes which do not have enough flexibility built into them to respond to the specificities of a given context. Additionally, donors themselves are political (and economic) actors with their own priorities, incentives and objectives. Their ideas, preferences and views on V&A combined with their political role in countries influence the choices they make in relation to priorities, actors and mechanisms. Given that they have funds to disperse, this results in a considerable amount of donor influence on V&A activities which are not necessarily in line with country priorities.

The other key lesson learned is that V&A is a relationship between state and society, and that working in isolation to support one side or the other of this equation will not lead to increased accountability. Crucially, for accountability to be achieved there has to be communication between the two groups, and concrete mechanisms to facilitate the interaction are crucial in this respect. Without an adequate interface between state and society, any efforts to build capacity or strengthen various institutions will be fruitless exercises. To date, donors have focused their efforts on building the functional and technical capabilities of either state or non-state institutions, but they have tended to overlook building the capacity of both to engage in a dialogue with each other. The challenge is how to create mechanisms that can function properly, with actors able to interact as equals and without undue influence of power imbalances and patronage systems

distorting the interaction. Thus, donors must be realistic about the capacity of civil society to act as a channel for voice and as agents of change in the short term given the structural conditions within which they operate within. This requires a critical examination of context and a more nuanced understanding of how and when voice does lead to accountability and the circumstances under which voice may undermine accountability mechanisms and processes.

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